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ABSTRACT

This document describes an innovative pilot project of peer counselors, implemented within the structure of an educational support service. A peer counseling project created by the Athletes Educational Planning Program of the University of Toledo (Ohio) Counseling Center is presented, in which student-athletes help other student-athletes to adjust and adapt to the rigors of a college environment. The rationale for using student-athletes as peer counselors is discussed, nine disadvantages which have been reported to be associated with the use of peer counselors are listed, and measures taken to control the disadvantages are explained. Recruitment of peer counselors is described and problems faced by the project and the counselors during program implementation are reviewed. The pilot project's outcome, its failure, and reasons for its failure are discussed. Beliefs, perceptions, and fears regarding the peer counselors, and global negative reactions to the peer counselors, are documented. Recommendations for future use of student-athletes as peer counselors in education support services are discussed. (Author/NB)

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STUDENT-ATHLETES AS PEER COUNSELORS

by

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ABSTRACT

An innovative pilot project of peer counselors is implemented within the structure of an educational support service. Student-athletes helping other student-athletes to adjust and adapt to the rigors of a college environment is reported. The rationale for utilizing student-athletes as peer counselors, the measures taken to control the disadvantages which have been reported to be associated with their use, the pilot project's outcome, and recommendations for future use of student-athletes as peer counselors in educational support services are included.

STUDENT-ATHLETES

as

PEER COUNSELORS

> Peer counseling programs are becoming important student services on college campuses where students are helping each other and themselves in many imaginative ways. (Giddan & Austin, 1982, p. 3)

People have needed help, support, comfort, and assistance from fellow human beings throughout history. Individuals in need, for the most part, have found that assistance through a natural support or folk-system -- a self-help network of paraprofessionals that consist of friends, neighbors, relatives, and community. Historically speaking, Hobbs (1964) traced the utilization of paraprofessionals back to a therapeutic philosophy which evolved during the late eighteenth century and was known as moral treatment. Since that time, paraprofessionals' utility and value have been documented (Gartner & Riessman, 1977; 1984).

In America, the tradition of paraprofessionals can best be seen in the origins of such programs as Alcoholics Anonymous, Synanom, and Parents Without Partners to name a

few. The paraprofessional or self-help concept encourages individuals who have similar backgrounds, experiences, and concerns to work together without professional intervention in order to resolve difficulties. The process of self-help builds on an individual's ability to accept responsibility and to persist in providing and in utilizing mutual aid (Katz & Bender, 1976). Over time, paraprofessionals have evolved as important adjuncts to the work of professionals and, in many cases, have emerged as the result of inadequate resources or the lack of interest by the professional community.

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Universities that accept marginal and underprepared students have responsibilities to those students. One responsibility that universities have to the academic high-risk student is to provide developmental or remedial coursework. Another responsibility is to provide special academic support services. The Counseling Center at the University of Toledo began offering a special academic support service (study skills seminars) to all University students during the 1979-80 academic year (Danchise, 1985). In 1982 the service was extended to a specific University population -- student-athletes. Because the student-athletes' study skills seminars met separately, and because

the seminars had to be adapted and modified to meet the specific needs of the target population, the student-athletes study skills seminars eventually evolved into the Athletes Educational Planning Program (AEPP). The primary mission of the new educational support service was to assist freshman student-athletes to adjust and adapt to the academic rigors required of a college environment. To meet this challenge, the expertise of the University Counseling Center's staff regarding study skills was called upon. As the fledgling program labored with growth and development, doctoral and master level students majoring in the behavioral sciences were recruited as group leaders. In addition, a training program was developed. Eventually, demands dictated that a program coordinator be hired.

As the AEPP progressed, it became apparent that the needs of all student-athletes were not being met. Whitner and Altman (1986) contend that providing a specialized educational support service to a specific university population may be a greater task than anticipated. The developers of AEPP were cognizant that the diversity of a target population's academic background would dictate the necessity to have academic information that would describe the program participants' previous academic achievements. Knowledge of the program participants' previous academic achievements would directly influence the amount of flexibility that the program developers would need to incorporate into the program's basic design.

Pre-college academic information regarding each student-athlete had previously been collected. The data had been used to predict academic success. A decision was made to reexamine and reevaluate this data. Collectively, the major academic achievement measures used to predict academic success are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Pre-College Academic Measures of the 1984, 1985, and the 1986 Incoming Freshman Student-Athlete.

	ACT	SAT	HSC	HSGPA
AVERAGE SCORE	18.3	879.1	6.7	2.771
RANGE OF SCORES	1 - 31	540 - 1370	0 - 11	1.643 - 4.000
NUMBER*	251	89	298	307

* Number of student-athletes assessed each measure (includes walk-ons).
ACT - American College Testing Program composite scores.
SAT - Scholastic Aptitude Test combined scores.
HSC - High School Courses: maximum of 12 college preparatory courses.
HSGPA - High School Grade Point Average.

The mean score of each measure has meaning per se. However, it is the range of scores of each measure that have intrinsic value. With the knowledge of the extreme educational achievement backgrounds of the student-athletes, a new goal was developed because study skills alone were not meeting the needs of all program participants. The new goal

was to assist all freshman student-athletes with the total educational transition from high school to college -- not just skill development. A three-year study by the Carnegie Foundation (Rae, 1986), reported that the discontinuity between high school and college created the greatest problems for most college students. To assist student-athletes in this problem area, the program would increase its scope by providing freshman student-athletes with information regarding: a) how to use and interpret the college literature; b) how to avoid pitfalls when registering for classes; c) how to balance a course load (course recommendation, not academic advising); and d) how to utilize the library. In addition, appropriate academic behavior (Wilbur & Wilbur, 1986) would be discussed, along with the availability of other University educational support services (reading, writing, and math labs; developmental and remedial classes and programs; tutors; etc.) Also, career exploration and development would be made available as well as individual and personal counseling. In general, the program could be viewed as an orientation on how to educationally survive at the University.

As the program participants' needs were more clearly defined, the program goals and focus had shifted and expanded. The question of how to best meet these changing needs was raised. Priorities and the lack of resources induce creativity.

PEER COUNSELORS

The evidence for the use of paraprofessionals as helpers is largely favorable. Durlak (1979) reviewed the comparative effectiveness of paraprofessional and professional helpers in 42 studies. The review started a controversy that resulted in rereviews and critiques of the same 42 studies (Durlak, 1981; Hattie, Sharpley & Rogers, 1984; Nietzel & Fisher, 1981). Based on a box score analysis of these diverse studies, Durlak found that paraprofessionals achieved outcomes equal to or significantly greater than those obtained by professionals. To be more specific, there were no significant differences among paraprofessionals and professionals in 28 of the studies. However, paraprofessionals were significantly more effective in 12 of the other investigations. Durlak's review favored the paraprofessionals, which was later supported by the meta-analysis procedures used by Hattie et al. (1984) who stated, "...the present review has clarified many aspects in the debate between Durlak and Nietzel and Fisher. Based on the studies reviewed by those authors, an overall conclusion from the 154 effect sizes is that paraprofessionals are at least as effective and in many instances more effective, than professional counselors." (p. 540)

A number of experts believe that college students make the best paraprofessional helpers (D'Andrea & Salovey, 1983; Ender & Winston, 1984; Giddan, in press; Giddan & Austin, 1982) and, in general, agree that there can be a number of disadvantages associated with their use. However, evidence of student-athletes functioning as peer counselors (helping other student-athletes) could not be found in the literature. Therefore, the general disadvantages of using college students as peer counselors was examined. The major salient disadvantages of using college students as peer counselors were determined to be that:

1. professionals should be the providers of service.
2. peer counselors are not sufficiently knowledgeable or trained properly to help others.
3. peer counselors represent the "blind" leading the "blind."
4. peer counselors tend to blame the "victim."
5. peer counselors tend to project their own problems onto others.
6. peer counselors are too easily coopted or exploited personally, vocationally, or financially.
7. peer counselors do not have professional commitments, ethical principles, or vocational identifications to guide them.
8. programs are not sufficiently comprehensive and are too brief to produce a well-trained peer counselor.

9. peer counselors have ambiguous roles, difficult to specify, define, and explain.

The positive aspects of utilizing student-athletes as peer counselors in order to assist other student-athletes achieve educationally were obvious. Thus, the task at hand was to formulate a strategy that could be implemented which would reduce or eliminate the perceived disadvantages of using college students as peer counselors.

PILOT PROJECT

After scrutinizing and evaluating the major salient disadvantages of utilizing college students as peer counselors, a decision was made to implement a pilot project. The decision was based on two beliefs. One belief was that the major disadvantages of using college students as peer counselors could be controlled. The second belief was that peer counselors could provide incoming freshman student-athletes with valuable insights regarding the process of adjustment and adaptation to a college environment. As role-models, the peer counselors could share their experiences and their acquired University survival skills. The reality of "this is how to" information from a peer could have lasting effects.

The pilot project would consist of one or two peer counselors in each seminar group. The peer counselors would

be paired with an experienced group leader in order to complement each others' expertise and to enrich the total group experience. To be a peer counselor the student-athlete had to have been a former program participant with a proven academic achievement record. Peer counselors would be required to attend all AEPP staff meetings and all training sessions. In addition, as an incentive, peer counselors could earn course credit or a small stipend if all required rules and guidelines could be met.

The rationale for structuring the pilot project in such a manner is that it allows the major disadvantages listed above to be controlled. Pairing of the peer counselor with an experienced leader, and the peer counselor selection process, controls for disadvantages One through Six, and has a positive influence on the other three. The selection of former group members would also help control for disadvantages Two, Three, and Eight. The only anticipated problem areas were disadvantage Seven (professional commitment, etc.), disadvantage Eight (training) and disadvantage Nine (role-definition). These three disadvantages could easily be addressed. Numbers Seven and Eight could be resolved in the training sessions, and number Nine by verbal and written explanations and definitions of the peer counselors role to staff, coaches, and program participants.

RECRUITMENT

Contact was made with several potential candidates who were advised of the intent to utilize student-athletes as peer counselors. Six (three female and three male) candidates responded and were interviewed. All six candidates said they wanted to be involved in the program. Each of the candidates believed that their experiences would be a valuable asset to the program. Five (three females and two males) of the potential peer counselors made formal commitments to the program.

FALL 1986

With the addition of the pilot project, the AEPP began the 1986 academic year with high expectations. Each year the young program had gained trust and respectability as its credibility increased among student-athletes, coaches, and other University professionals. The addition of peer counseling was expected to have an immediate positive impact on the areas of decreasing resistance, building trust, and providing valuable academic information. The long term effects of the program were thought to be increased retention and higher graduation rates of student-athletes. The peer counselor pilot project was implemented at the beginning of Fall Quarter 1986. The pilot project officially ended two quarters later -- Winter Quarter, 1987. Unofficially, the project died during the middle of the 1987 Winter Quarter.

PROBLEMS

Almost immediately, during the pre-group training phase of the program, one of the five peer counselor left the program. By mid-quarter, the exodus of two others had occurred. Three weeks into the Winter Quarter the remaining two peer counselors reported that other commitments and problems with their schedules made it difficult to attend all the program's mandates. Two additional weeks of sporadic involvement by the peer counselors resulted in a decision to terminate the project at the end of the quarter.

Even though precautions had been taken to control the disadvantages of using college students as peer counselors, the pilot project failed. Unanticipated problems were the project's demise. In retrospect, the unanticipated problems began to manifest themselves at the program's onset. However, it was not until the eighth week of the first quarter during a self-report that underlying problems of the pilot project surfaced to a conscious level. Follow-up interviews with the peer counselors and feedback from program participants confirmed the earlier reports of certain beliefs, perceptions, and fears regarding the peer counselors.

The disadvantages listed hereinbefore were controlled through additional training, the recruitment and selection process, and the pairing of peer counselors with experienced

group leaders. The pairing was a complementary experience. However, it allowed the group leader to observe and have command of the group experience. Therefore, only a few in-group incidents were reported. The incidents were minor and appropriately handled. The in-group interactions were not a problem. The problems of utilizing student-athletes as peer counselors in an educational support service occurred outside the groups.

GLOBAL

The peer counselors were perceived by many of the upper-class student-athletes as "traitors." Someone who could not be trusted because they (peer counselors) would side with the authority figures. Personal friendships were tested and strained. Some of the peer counselors began to experience a sense of isolation. They had a fear of being treated by other student-athletes as outcasts. In some cases the peer counselors were called names or labeled "pet."

FRESHMAN STUDENT-ATHLETES

The incoming freshman student-athletes did not think of the peer counselors as a bridge to a new environment (through the provision of skill instruction and general campus information). Nor, did the freshmen perceive the peer counselor functioning as an agent of change by modeling appropriate academic behaviors. The freshman student-

athletes were not aware that a covert function of the peer counselors was to help expedite the entire high school to college transition through the breakdown and elimination of resistance.

Besides the global negative reactions to the peer counselors that was mentioned hereinbefore, many of the incoming freshman student-athletes were uncertain or suspicious of the actions and motives of the peer counselors. Some of the freshmen believed that peer counselors were there to "spy" or "trick" them, or to send "secret" or "special" reports to their coaches. Many of the student-athletes were sensitive to the notion that peer counselors may have access or knowledge of their past academic achievements. Also, the question of what happens if a peer counselor gets caught up in a momentary crisis (e.g., over react to something that is said or done by a group member)? In addition, what happens when a peer counselor loses perspective and balance -- takes on or assumes the role of a professional or an authority figure and begins to order, dictate, demand, and threaten other group members outside the group? Instead of being a buffer between the student-athlete and the authority figures, the peer counselors, to a degree, seemed to have increased the resistance, the distance, and the hostility.

In the beginning, many of the freshman student-athletes were looking for a sense of affiliation, a reference point. Someone who could relate to their world views and expectations. They wanted to have a conscious belief that they are known and cared about by some knowledgeable person in a bewildering environment. The concept of peer counseling for student-athletes was intended to promote honesty, mutual support, and lower defenses. Peer counselors were to provide feedback into a larger helping system so the appropriate program changes could be made in order to meet the needs of the target population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The question of peer counselors as valuable tools in the helping profession is not the question. The question is whether peer counseling works for certain populations -- specifically, student-athletes. To address this question, programs that utilize student-athletes as peer counselors in educational support programs need to be documented. The documentation needs to include a component to determine what relationships exist outside the confines of the program for both the participants and the peer counselors. If no existing programs exist, pilot projects or programs could be implemented with caution. However, it seems more feasible to utilize other college student populations as helpers and avoid the risk of destroying friendships or harming

individuals. The proximity, commonalities, and camaraderie of athletes make it difficult to separate or divide them. College athletes have grown and developed, both mentally and physically, under the strict discipline of an authority figure. Most athletes detest discipline and authority -- but, they respect it. This is why they are college athletes. To voluntarily take on a role which identifies with authority may be against the nature of most college student-athletes.

All the problems that are reported did not plague the AEPP's pilot project. Some of the problems are anticipatory, and some problems are not discussed (the demands placed on the student-athlete's time). The utilization of student-athletes as peer counselors occurred within the context of a specific University environment and the problems that arose may be unique to the specific institution. Also, the problem of utilizing student-athletes as peer counselors may be unique to the particular population, or unique to the particular type of program, or it may be the particular personalities of the individuals involved. Or, it just may be, all of the mentioned working in concert. Nevertheless, the problems may serve as a caveat for other professionals who are planning to utilize student-athletes as peer counselors or planning to implement similar programs.

SUMMARY

Within the structure of an educational support service a pilot project that utilized student-athletes as peer counselors is reported. The major disadvantages of using peer counselors and the measures taken to neutralize them are discussed. The project's impact and outcome, along with unanticipated problems and recommendations are presented.

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